



Blocking the transmission of faith

Exploring the relationship between religious persecution and family disruption

Dennis P. Petri¹

1. Introduction

Several years ago, I spent time in a boarding school established to serve children from contexts of religious persecution. The school's mission was to provide a safe environment for children whose parents were involved in Christian ministry in crime-ridden areas. Sending their children to this boarding school allowed parents to continue their ministry without exposing their children to the same dangers, ensuring them a quality education.

The children in this boarding school seemed well cared for, but they undoubtedly faced the challenges of growing up without their parents present most of the time – in addition to, in some cases, the severe traumas they had experienced before arriving. Some of the children were orphans or became orphans during their time at the school, essentially transforming the institution into an orphanage for them.

As several children at the school reached age 18, they left their Christian faith behind. Each case is unique, so drawing generalized conclusions based on a few observations would be premature. However, it's not uncommon for children raised in boarding schools to rebel, including rebellion against their parents' faith. The absence of their parents during their upbringing likely played a role in their loss of faith.

This dynamic got me thinking about the relationship between religious persecution and family disruption, which can have significant implications for the transmission of faith. This area appears to be underexplored in the field of religious freedom research.

This brief essay examines the relationship between religious persecution, family disruption, and the transmission of faith. I propose three hypotheses that

¹ Dr Dennis P. Petri is international director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom; founder and scholar-at-large at the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America; Professor in International Relations and Humanities at the Universidad Latinoamericana de Ciencia y Tecnología; and director of the Foundation Platform for Social Transformation. This article uses American English. Email: dpetri@iirf.global.

could lend themselves to both qualitative and quantitative research designs. However, lacking the data to test these hypotheses, I refrain from drawing definitive conclusions. My aim is to draw attention to this relationship and to encourage other researchers to explore it further.

2. The relationship between religious persecution, family stability, and the transmission of faith

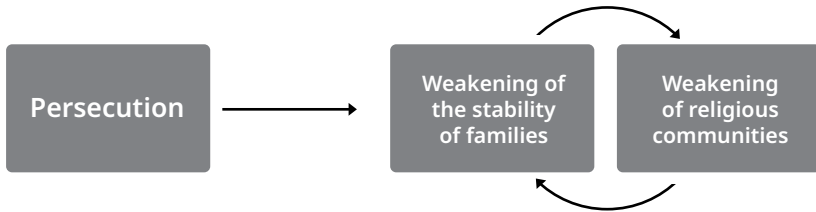
Statistical evidence suggests that attendance at religious services tends to decrease among individuals who grew up in disrupted families. According to the 2021 General Social Survey (GSS) of the United States, for instance, 52 percent of adults who grew up in intact families as adolescents (i.e., lived with both biological parents) attend religious services at least monthly, compared to 42 percent of adults who grew up in non-intact families. Indeed, the transmission of faith appears to be correlated with family stability, defined as families where both parents are present during their children's early childhood and adolescence. In other words, religious upbringing significantly predicts religiosity in adulthood (Gunnoe & Moore 2002; McCullough, Tsang & Brion 2003; Ambert & Saucier 1986).

While limited additional research has directly connected family structure in adolescence with adult religious attendance, several other studies have highlighted the importance of family structure in transmitting religious beliefs and practices across generations. Scott Myers (1996) reported that adults "raised in households characterized by high marital happiness and with both biological parents present are more likely to resemble their parents in religious beliefs." Several scholars also found that children whose parents had divorced spent less time in religious activities (Ambert & Saucier 1986; Larson, Dworkin & Gillman 2001; Denton 2012).

Based on this research, a country with high divorce rates can expect to witness the weakening of its religious communities in subsequent generations. This is primarily because divorced parents are generally less successful in transmitting faith to their children. Moreover, children of divorced parents are often more susceptible to social problems, such as educational failure or drug use, and are likely to replicate their parents' patterns when forming their own families. Therefore, destabilizing families is arguably the most effective strategy for eradicating faith in a country.

This finding has far-reaching implications. The more disrupted families a society produces, the weaker its religious communities will be. This relationship is also self-reinforcing, as disrupted families generate more disrupted families, further weakening religious communities.

In view of this relationship between family stability and the transmission of faith, it is reasonable to posit a link between family disruption resulting from



Petri – Diagram 1

religious persecution and the transmission of faith, because one of the consequences (whether intended or unintended) of religious persecution is family disruption. Let's explore three research hypotheses.

3. Hypothesis 1: Persecution, by its nature, weakens families.

It is logical to assume that when individuals suffer persecution, their social environment suffers as well. This suffering can be so severe that it significantly affects family stability and has negative consequences on family unity and children's upbringing. For example, the absence of a father – whether due to death for his faith or prolonged imprisonment – can significantly impact children's upbringing, similar to the negative consequences of divorce. Marriages may also break down under the pressures of persecution.

Of course, the cause of family disruption must be considered. One study has found that the effect on church attendance resulting from family disruption is stronger in separated or divorced families than in widowed families (Ambert & Saucier 1986). Nonetheless, in both scenarios, the impact on the transmission of faith is significant. We can assume that this also occurs in persecution contexts.

4. Hypothesis 2: Persecution, implicitly or explicitly, deliberately targets family stability.

The weakening of families should not be viewed solely as a side effect of persecution, as it is often part of a deliberate strategy by persecuting actors. This strategy may be implicit or explicit, depending on the context.

What children are taught in their families, schools, and places of worship plays a crucial role in shaping the worldview of the next generation. When families are weakened, the transmission of faith to future generations is hindered. In this sense, weakening families can become an essential aspect of a long-term, generational strategy to eradicate the transmission of faith from a country's culture.

This is also one reason why the five "great global persecutions" of Christians in world history identified by Ronald Boyd-MacMillan (the Roman, Islamic, Mongol,

Christian,² and atheistic) were so successful in eradicating the church: “Christianity (and any other religion, for that matter) seems to have little defense against persecution when it lasts for multiple generations” (Boyd-MacMillan 2019:184).

5. Hypothesis 3: The weakening of family stability is a common element across all persecution contexts.

Persecution extends beyond individuals and tends to permeate all aspects of life, including family life. When religious discrimination against a particular minority becomes ingrained in a country’s culture, all social institutions – including family, education, places of worship, arts, and government – gradually fall under repressive forces, restricting religious freedom in each sphere of life.

Therefore, we can assume that the weakening of family stability is a recurring element in all persecution contexts. Under communist rule, for instance, demographic planning policies such as China’s one-child policy invade family autonomy and limit the transmission of faith through restrictions on family size. In contemporary Venezuela, children are separated from their parents and raised in state “orphanages,” severing their connection to their families.

In Islamic regimes, kidnappings, rape, and human trafficking specifically target Christian families and the transmission of the Christian faith. Kimberly Smith’s book *Passport through Darkness* illustrates this situation in Darfur, Sudan: “The Janjaweed rape our women. When they have spent themselves on us, sometimes they continue to rape us with sticks. They tear out our womanhood so we can make no more Christian babies. They kill our men. What men remain will not take us as their wives because we are marked” (Smith 2011:58).

In contexts of organized crime, the creation of a climate of violence undermines family stability and denies children the opportunity to grow up in a safe, protected environment. In extremely violent societies where families are disrupted, youth gangs emerge as an alternative family structure for youths who belong to disrupted families and feel rejected.

6. Final comments

The statistical evidence suggests a clear correlation between family stability and religiosity in adulthood, highlighting the importance of intact family structures in fostering religious commitment. It’s urgent to also assess the impact of disruptions to family life caused by religious persecution on the transmission of religious beliefs and practices across generations. By better understanding these

² The term “Christian persecution” refers here to the violent internal conflicts among Christians during the “wars of religion” that erupted after the Reformation during the 16th and 17th centuries.

dynamics, policymakers, scholars, and advocates can develop more effective strategies to protect religious freedom and promote social cohesion in diverse societies.

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